

Movies • Music • Arts

## Not for kids

PG films too scary for littlies



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# On the dark side

Where have all the G-rated children's movies gone? **Des Partridge** reports

GOING to the movies these days can be scary for kids.

More and more films that appear to target young children are in fact aimed at an older market.

Take Walt Disney's latest offering, Charles Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*, (far right). At a night-time preview screening last week, the first of the ghost sequences, featuring a skeleton, sent some youngsters from their seats to their parents' laps, and as the ghost scenes continued at least one group including two children under 10 headed to the car park.

Invitations had suggested the film would have most appeal for children 10 years and older, which meant the preview audience was predominantly adult, but some guests did bring young children.

The combination of Walt Disney's film studio and Charles Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol* suggests the making of popular family entertainment for all ages.

But the PG (parental guidance) rating set by the Office of Film and Literature Classification in Sydney for the film's "mild themes and scary scenes" should be noted.

*A Christmas Carol* is not a typical Disney holiday family movie, one that is designed for families including small children.

And it's not the only movie confusing parents.

With live-action G-rated movies increasingly rare (*High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana* were Disney G-rated films aimed at teens), there has been discussion in America in recent weeks about the impact of PG-rated movies on very young children.

This was sparked by the American release last month of *Where the Wild Things Are* (below) based on Maurice Sendak's classic children's book, opening in Australian cinemas on December 3 through Roadshow.



The film, shot mainly in Victoria, was also given a PG classification this week for its Australian season, for its "mild violence and scary scenes".

Roadshow's first Brisbane preview this month will be a late afternoon screening – again to indicate that the content may not be suitable for all children, particularly those very young.

Sendak's picture book, first published in 1963, is the story of Max (Max Records), a lively but sensitive boy who feels misunderstood at home. He escapes to where the Wild Things are, landing on an island where he meets mysterious and strange creatures (actors wearing gigantic costumes) whose emotions are wild and unpredictable, in keeping with their actions.

Dave Eggers, who co-wrote the screenplay with Spike Jonze, says the movie's influences certainly went beyond the standard child fare.

"The movies that we talked about at the very beginning – *Wizard of Oz* and *Black Stallion* and *My Life as a Dog* and *400 Blows* – were about childhood and did it from a child's-eye view as opposed to more like ... I call them confections," Eggers said in an interview in Chicago.

Jonze himself has said he didn't set out to make a children's movie, but a movie about childhood.

"In a way, it's an action movie starring a nine-year-old," he said.

The Disney brand, known for years for "family" films, turned out numerous G-rated classics from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to *The Lion King*.

But the success of more intense films such as Disney's M-rated *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Warner Bros *Harry Potter* films (inset), initially PG, but later M-rated, and Sony Pictures *Monster House* (below right), has shown the box office isn't hampered by ratings higher than the G benchmark.

The emphasis is on action and thrills rather than cheer in *A Christmas Carol* too, with special-effects sequences designed to boost the impact of the 3-D experience.

Many of the flying sequences are closer to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* films than Dickens.

Dickens' novel, first published in 1843, is basically a ghost story.

The "scary scenes" are the elements which are highlighted by director Robert Zemeckis's 3-D treatment of Dickens' story (filmed several times

before), which opens in cinemas today.

This new version is a cleverly made, quality film, with convincing performances, but it is one that, like Dickens' novella, is likely to connect more with adults than young children.

Jim Carrey plays multiple roles, including the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Christmas Yet to Come.

They visit the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge (Carrey) on Christmas Eve, seven years after the death of business partner Marley (Gary Oldman).

Oldman also features in multiple roles including those of Scrooge's harassed hard-working employee, Bob Cratchit, father of the disabled youngster Tiny Tim (also voiced by Oldman).

Other well-known actors included in the high-end production include Bob Hoskins, Cary Elwes and Robin Wright Penn.

**Disney's *A Christmas Carol***  
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## G films scarce

G-RATED children's films are hard to find in Brisbane (although two current documentaries, *In Search of Beethoven* and *Michael Jackson's This Is It*, are both G-rated).

The recently released children's films *Astro Boy*, *G-Force*, *Up and Shorts* are all rated PG.

*Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakuel* (the only children's film opening in cinemas on Boxing Day, the biggest day of the movie year) has a G-rating.

*Fantastic Mr Fox*, based on Roald Dahl's story, opens on January 1 with a PG-rating.

*Tooth Fairy*, starring Dwayne Johnson in the title role, has a G rating. It opens on January 14.

*The Secret of Moonacre*, rated PG, a fantasy centred on a 13-year-old girl, opens on the same date.

## PARENTS BEWARE!

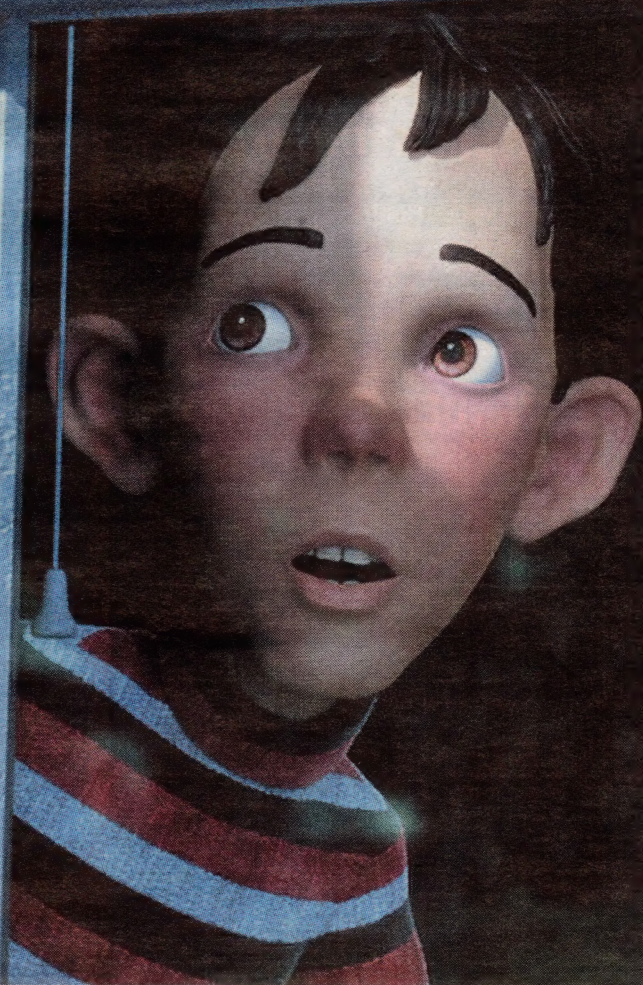
YOUNG children were much more likely to be frightened by images and sounds on screen than most parents realised, Professor Joanne Cantor, director of the Centre for Communication Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told *The New York Times*.

She said children didn't fully comprehend the distinction between fantasy and reality until the age of six or seven.

She believes there are very few movies that are "safe" for children up to the age of five.

Young children were also particularly sensitive to grotesque visual images and loud, intense noises.

"Cartoon images may be less frightening in some cases than live-action movies that convey the same story because the images are likely to be 'cuter' and less grotesque," she said.



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## The Time Traveller's Wife



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M

Infrequent violence

In Cinemas Now Showing

ROADSHOW FILMS





# Bumpy ride for Christmas spirit

OUT OF PLACE: Jim Carrey everywhere as the grasping Ebenezer Scrooge and also as the assorted ghosts who coax him into embracing the Christmas spirit of goodwill to all.

**Disney's A Christmas Carol**  
(PG) ★★★★★

BAH! Humbug! Last time we looked, it was Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

It's not easy to reconcile this obviously very expensive and technically impressive American 3-D motion-capture animation with the more modest British screen and TV adaptations from Christmases past – particularly the 1951 film starring Alastair Sim which is undoubtedly the best of them all.

Director Robert Zemeckis, writer of *Back to the Future*, Oscar-winner for

*Forrest Gump*, and a pioneer of the animation technique he's used here, in films such as *The Polar Express* and *Beowulf*, doesn't make small, intimate movies.

His version, while basically faithful to the Dickens classic, is a rocket-powered treatment, designed to be as thrilling and exciting as a theme park rollercoaster ride.

It's also moderately scary, and this means it isn't likely to delight all ages. Teens should enjoy the scary elements and the emphasis on action more than the very young.

Zemeckis appears to have fallen under the influence of the Harry Potter films.

He regularly injects flying sequences clearly designed to add to the excitement level but which are jarringly out of place in the traditional story.

Overall, the 3-D effects are used more sparingly, gaining emphasis through the outlines of buildings or foreground figures, and there's a lot of snow falling to reinforce the Christmas theme.

It's a film that hardly pauses to allow the emotion and pathos of Dickens' story – a story he said made him laugh and cry while he was writing it – to surface.

Overhead scenes of towns and villages in the flight path also don't

suggest scenes in Dickens' England, with architecture more typically north American.

Actors play multiple roles, with versions of hyper-powered Jim Carrey everywhere as the grasping Ebenezer Scrooge and also as the assorted ghosts whose Christmas Eve visits cajole the celebrated miser into embracing the Christmas spirit of goodwill to all.

Animated versions of Gary Oldman also feature not only as Marley (Scrooge's dead partner) but also as Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's harassed clerk, as well as Cratchit's beloved son, Tiny Tim.

Bob Hoskins adds some weight to

the adaptation as the happier, younger Scrooge's cheerful employer, Fezziwig, and Colin Firth is Scrooge's nephew, Fred.

Robin Wright Penn is the lovely Belle, briefly romantically attached to Scrooge.

Enough elements of Dickens' story remain for a viewer to be refreshed by Scrooge's change of heart and to be moved by his rediscovery of the Christmas spirit that climaxes the story.

But if you want something more intimate, and certainly closer to Dickens, seek out the 1951 black and white British film, starring Alastair Sim. (96 min)

## Case of horror deja vu

**Case 39** (MA15+) ★★★★★

GERMAN director Christian Alvart's American debut isn't as slick as his serial killer thriller *Antibodies*, which caught the attention of Paramount in Hollywood, but don't ignore it if you enjoy horror.

Still to be released in the US, and bumped around the studio's Australian schedule before finally being released today, the drama is one of those movies that's bad enough to make it worth seeing.

Not likely to end up on any list of classic psychological horror thrillers (such as *The Bad Seed*, *The Exorcist* or *The Omen*), this studio film shares a link with those in that the catalyst for the drama is a child.

Here she's 10-year-old Lillith Sullivan (adding to the extensive CV of 15-year-old pro Jodelle Ferland, who is again entirely convincing).

Social worker Emily Jenkins (Renee Zellweger) obviously isn't a student of Hebrew legend or the Bible, as writer Ray Wright shows his hand by naming Ferland's character after the frightening demon.



PREDICTABLE: Renee Zellweger and Bradley Cooper in *Case 39*.

Here Emily's last-minute intervention saves Lillith from a horrendous death.

The girl's religious zealot parents (Callum Keith Rennie and Kerry O'Malley) have stuffed the terrified youngster into their gas oven before lighting it.

Emily is so moved by the girl's history of abuse that she cuts through red tape to get permission to let her live with her until a suitable foster home can be found.

Emily learns pretty quickly that Lillith's parents weren't so crazy after all, as clues that the haunted young girl isn't as innocent as she appears begin to pile up.

Her demonic powers lead to a

murder committed by another of Emily's juvenile cases and the death of her psychologist friend (Bradley Cooper, who was Zellweger's beau at the time of filming).

Cooper's death occurs in very bizarre circumstances that provide the movie's most creative horror sequence, courtesy of CGI effects.

There isn't much that will surprise you, apart from wondering why *Deadwood*'s Ian McShane signed on for his thankless role as Emily's detective friend who is slow to accept her pleading for help to do something about Lillith.

There's little suspense, as it's obvious that she's possessed, and the story plays out predictably. (109 min)

## Scenic but no substance

**Genova** (M) ★★★★★

THE Italian port city of Genova is the star of British director Michael Winterbottom's drama and scenes set in its shadowy alleys and along its attractive coastline might be enough for some.

However, anyone in search of a meaningful story should look for substance elsewhere.

When his wife Marianne (Hope Davis) dies in a car crash while driving with her daughters Kelly (Willa Holland) and Mary (Perla Haney-Jardine), widowed Chicago university lecturer Joe (Colin Firth) decides to make a fresh start.

He takes Kelly, 16, and Mary, 10, with him and meets up with long-time university friend Barbara (Catherine Keener).

Winterbottom's aim appears to be to make something as interesting as Nicolas Roeg's famous occult thriller *Don't Look Now*, which used locations around Venice to great effect.

This also is partly a ghost story, as Mary is haunted by the accident that took her mother's life (which was, let's face it, her fault).

The dead woman is a presence in Genova, and turns up in the most surprising places.

There also is an extended scene where the 10-year-old goes missing –



BACK SEAT: Willa Holland (left).

another nod to *Don't Look Now*. Kelly isn't haunted by the past. She's soon mixing with young boys instead of chaperoning Mary.

Scenes around Genova – that curiously exclude some of the most beautiful parts of the city – and long piano lessons, can't make up for a solid story.

Winterbottom is an adventurous filmmaker and there's a made-up-on-the-run air about the entire movie – another he's made efficiently with a small crew.

It is to be hoped the director enjoyed his time in Genova.

His audience is unlikely to be as enthusiastic about his trip, as *Genova* fails to provide the view with much that is satisfying and instead accomplishes only a superficial examination of grief and the way people respond. (93 min)